

SFS's position:

Open and egalitarian universities

Adopted at the General Assembly in 2020



Table of contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Wider recruitment - more routes to higher education	2
2.1 The composition of the student group	2
2.2 Educational and professional guidance	2
2.3 Fee-paying students	3
2.4 Education as a human right	3
3. Widened recruitment and accessible studies	3
3.1 Equal prerequisites	4
3.2 Expenses linked to studies	4
3.3 Accessible learning environments	5
3.4 Psychosocial health and prerequisites for a beneficial work environment	5
3.5 The student finance system	6
3.6 Health and medical care	8
3.7 Social security systems	8
3.8 Wider opportunities for having an influence	9
3.9 Studying with a disability	9
4. A gender equal and representative teaching staff	10
4.1 From a homogeneous to a heterogeneous teaching staff	10
4.2 Norm-critical educational methods	11
4.3 Gender equality integration	12

Open and egalitarian universities

1. Introduction

This position is an opinion document subordinate to the Programme of Principles of Sweden's National Union of Students (SFS), with the aim of clarifying SFS's opinions in specific issues. The standpoint shall constitute guidance for SFS's elected representatives and office. SFS's position: Open and egalitarian universities presents SFS's opinions surrounding what open and egalitarian universities entail and how they can be achieved. Unless indicated otherwise, in the document "student" refers to students within education at first-cycle and advanced level.

2. Wider recruitment - more routes to higher education

This chapter deals with how more people can find a route to higher education and who bears responsibility for a widened recruitment. The chapter also identifies what obstacles need to be removed. Widened recruitment is about giving everybody the opportunity and prerequisites to apply and be accepted for higher education. To achieve this, recruitment by the higher education institutions of students from groups that are under-represented in academic courses must increase.

2.1 The composition of the student group

Universities must work actively to widen recruitment to higher education, for example, by adapting their marketing and range of courses to a wider target group. However, it is not solely the responsibility of the universities. It is in the interests of society as a whole to have a well-educated population with varying life experiences. The student population should reflect the composition of society. By reflecting the composition of society, experiences, perspectives and skills are utilised in the development of a knowledge society. With wide representation, the width of the knowledge that is created increases, and also becomes available to more people. In this way, students become ready to meet the challenges of the future. In order to achieve widened recruitment, the state, municipalities and other parts of society need to pursue an active policy that encourages studies and makes it possible for everybody to have the choice of studying in higher education.

2.2 Educational and professional guidance

It is important that universities provide information about the courses they offer, and not just in terms of their content, but also in which ways the courses can be useful, for example the opportunities they lead to on completion of studies. In this context, educational and professional guidance fills an important function in providing information about the

usefulness of higher education. Educational guidance shall be available at upper secondary school, adult education institutions, the Swedish Public Employment Service and municipal libraries, and also provide information and interviews about the opportunities for higher education. Easily accessible educational guidance ensures that more people become aware of higher education.

2.3 Fee-paying students

SFS believes that education shall be free of charge for everyone. SFS is strongly against fees for higher education, and disagrees with higher education funded through student fees. However, for as long as the fees remain, SFS considers that alternatives are required in order to make higher education more accessible for fee-paying students. Such alternatives include, for example, government grants for which fee-paying students can apply.

2.4 Education as a human right

SFS considers that higher education is a human right, which should be independent of citizenship status. For this reason, SFS wants people who have not yet obtained a residence permit to be given the opportunity to study in Sweden. Higher education contributes to the individual being included in Swedish society. In the same way as work, full-time studies should be a route to a permanent residence permit. Foreign education is a competency and an asset, both for academia and for the Swedish labour market. Knowledge should not to be wasted, SFS therefore considers that clearer and more effective validation of foreign educational merits is required. It is not sufficient to direct money towards various public authorities, there must also be a uniform, functioning and legally safe system on which to base the validation process.

3. Widened recruitment and accessible studies

Widened recruitment is about designing the education so that everybody who has been accepted has the opportunity to complete it, for example through educational development and the right to support measures.

A wide and heterogeneous student cohort places high demands on treatment and varied study arrangements that guarantee an inclusive study and working environment, which is highlighted by SFS' Programme of Principles. In a heterogeneous student cohort, there exists varied knowledge about academia and its language; a language that students need in order to participate in academic knowledge development. An inclusive study arrangement safeguards freedom from fees and accessible educational media. The environments that students inhabit should meet the statutory accessibility requirements, and also be a beneficial physical and psychosocial work environment for all.

Access to financial and social security systems impacts on widened participation. Financial security through the student finance system reduces the need to work alongside full-time studies in order to make finances work. The social security system provides support when students become sick. During periods of sickness, the country's student health centres play an important role. When sickness becomes more long-term, students must be covered by a well-functioning security system in order to have time to rehabilitate and return to their studies. Likewise, students who are parents must be covered by a well-functioning security system.

3.1 Equal prerequisites

Students bring with them varying prior knowledge and different prior understanding of academia into their studies. In order to facilitate everybody's knowledge about academic ethics and the art of both speaking and writing in an academic way, there must be national responsibility for safeguarding the range of free-of-charge courses in academic writing, speaking and writing workshops at the country's higher education institutions. Such courses may not be put at risk as a result of a university's financial prerequisites.

3.2 Expenses linked to studies

Educational media or educational tools are instruments students need in order to achieve the learning goals of their course. By law, higher education in Sweden shall be free, but if students have to pay for educational media and educational tools to achieve the course goals, higher education is not free of fees for individual students. Study materials and educational tools required to provide the prerequisites for achieving the course goals should therefore be paid for by the university and not the student. A list of the educational media and educational tools needed for a student to participate in a course shall be published no later than two months before the course starts. Irrespective of whether a student needs to read up on the study material or plan in order to complete the course, individual students need to know the prerequisites in good time in order to plan their participation.

Initially, funds should be channelled to university libraries in order to increase the availability of course literature. This also means that higher education institutions need to widen the range of, for example, open access course literature and licences for digital editions. As all education is not characterised by course literature or campus-based learning, the computer software required for a course should be made available to all students. The materials required for practical elements of the education should be available to students at the institution. As there are many hidden costs for students taking part in placements ("VFU"), it is important that students receive compensation for expenses they have had in conjunction with VFU. Thus students should receive full compensation for all the expenses linked to practical work or VFU, including travel and accommodation.

3.3 Accessible learning environments

Learning environment refers to a place where learning takes place. A learning environment can be both physical and virtual. The learning environment shall be adapted according to the educational methods used for each learning element in order to stimulate knowledge development.

The opportunity to study together is a quality issue. The exchange of experiences is one of the academic foundations for creating new knowledge. Some educational formats are characterised by physical learning environments. The physical learning environment can include obstacles to participation. The education shall stand on sufficient grounds, independent of the student population. Likewise, students with children should not be shut out because of any lack of, for example, changing tables, breastfeeding areas or study places where children are also welcome.

Students must also be given the opportunity to plan their everyday life in accordance with the scope of the studies at the pace of study established in the syllabus. The dates for examined elements should be set within the framework of the pace of study. A course studied during the day should be examined during the daytime on weekdays, just as a course studied during the evening should be examined during the evening.

The digital learning environment shall also be satisfactory. This means that room is needed for discussion and exchange of experiences in a natural way via digital platforms. The digital learning platforms should be adapted to text-to-speech, be possible to translate to other languages and take into account

3.4 Psychosocial health and prerequisites for a beneficial work environment

Mental ill-health is a social problem that also affects many students. The student's mental health can affect his or her capacity to pursue their studies and if fewer students complete their studies due to mental ill-health, it will entail increased costs for both society and the individual. For the individual, it also leads to inferior prerequisites for forthcoming challenges in, for example, working life. There can be many reasons why students suffer from mental ill-health, some more general for all people and others more linked to the study situation and the work environment at the university or college.

Students, just like employees, should be entitled to a secure social and organisational work environment. It is therefore of major importance that the state and its authorities has guidelines, laws and regulations which ensure a satisfactory work environment for students. A satisfactory work environment for students is not exactly the same as for employees. Among other things, it is of major importance for students' work environment that there are well executed and thought-out course and programme plans which ensure a reasonable workload and cohesive educational programmes as well as accessible,

pleasant and safe physical environments. In addition to this, there is a general need for support bodies at universities to manage conflicts, both between students and between students and employees. It is also important to ensure that the existence of mediating functions between students and any supervisor, in particular in positions where the risk of personal conflicts can arise.

It should be the role of the student unions to appoint student safety representative at the respective higher education institution. The student unions should be given satisfactory conditions to be able to appoint as well as coordinate the functions for student safety representatives. The student safety representatives should receive training that corresponds to the standard of safety representatives' training. It is the university's responsibility to provide qualitative training for the student safety representatives. It should be up to each university, in consultation with the respective student union, to decide on which party organises the basic training. The student safety representatives should have a position that corresponds to that of the safety representatives, regardless of whether they work with the physical or psychosocial work environment.

There are a number of authorities that supervise the higher education institutions. This supervision should also involve how the institutions meet the requirements placed on the work environment and the students' situation in the institution. When several authorities are involved, it is important to have cooperation which entails support within and between the authorities which possess competence within the area, regardless of which authority has principal responsibility for the supervision. The authorities should assist with training or support and contribute in some other way to follow up the universities' systematic work environment management so that it takes place effectively and in close proximity to the student. SFS feels that the authorities should develop this work together through cooperation and that the responsibility rests equally on all authorities with responsibility for the students' work environment.

To be able to prevent mental ill-health, SFS considers that the state and its authorities should ensure that the higher education institutions investigate, evaluate and keep statistics of the students' health situation and the causes for the students' mental ill-health. It is of major importance that the universities ascertain the reasons behind the problem in order to be able to rectify and prevent it.

3.5 The student finance system

The student finance system is a basic prerequisite for open and egalitarian higher education. SFS's general principle is that student finance shall fully cover actual student expenses, and facilitate a reasonable living standard. The student finance system must also be adapted to life-long learning and facilitate studies throughout life. SFS considers that the student loan shall consist of a balance between loans and grants. It should furthermore be possible to separate weeks with student loan and weeks with student grant.

The student finance system should be adapted to the length of the educational programmes. The Bologna process meant that programmes at advanced level became one year longer with the transition from one-year to two-year Master programmes. This has contributed to reduced opportunities to start more programmes and courses than a Bachelor programme and a Master Programme. There are opportunities to study summer courses using student finance, but the choice of starting another programme or course during or after completion of exams is reduced. As the Swedish student finance system has not followed the universities' development of more and longer programmes, nor is it adapted for life-long learning and emphasis on the educational mandate of the universities, the number of weeks of student finance that can be applied for needs to be increased. SFS considers that the number of weeks for which student finance can be applied should be sufficient for at least eight years' full-time study. Extending the number of weeks goes in line with the length of the programme and the educational mandate of the universities.

SFS would like it to be possible to divide up the grant weeks and loan weeks with student finance and thus utilise them individually. Linking them together prevents life-long learning and the opportunity to, for example, try out higher education through an individual course financed by a study grant. It means that if a student studies for one semester and only applied for a study grant, the right to a study loan for a corresponding number of weeks is also used. This is a system that penalises individuals who choose to only apply for a study grant. The student finance system should not govern how students finance their studies.

Life-long learning means that it should be possible at any time in life to apply for higher education. Therefore, the age limit for how late in life it is possible to apply for student finance should be changed to the age of retirement. At the same time, student debt should always be written off at the age of retirement, as this makes it easier for people who have taken out a study loan late in life. Needing to pay off a student debt after retirement frightens people off from studying later in life and makes the possibility of further education or retraining more difficult.

The fact that the weeks with study loan are limited is a direct obstacle to life-long learning and Sweden as knowledge nation. SFS therefore considers that the student finance system should be more dynamic. The system means that if a student has paid back a certain number of weeks of his or her study loan, he or she can once again use them to finance studies. One obstacle to life-long learning is the threshold that regulates what income students can have alongside their studies. SFS has the principle that student finance should cover the student's actual costs. SFS is fundamentally positive towards a threshold, as it is a guarantee that it will always be possible to finance studies with student finance and without needing an income on the side. However, the threshold must not, for example, constitute an obstacle to selling one's home or moving capital between accounts. Consideration must also be taken to the fact that as an employee or contractor, it is not always possible to foresee or plan when payments are made. Students must not become liable for repayment due to unforeseen or unplanned income SFS also considers

that the threshold should apply solely for the weeks that the student receives student finance.

3.6 Health and medical care

The period of study involves factors such as stress and uncertain living conditions that can lead to a need for student health care. The illness or the mental and/or physical ill-health is sometimes related to studies. For this reason, student health centres are important to ensure that students are given the right conditions to feel healthy throughout their period of study. Erosion of educational budgets is leading to cuts in funding for student health centres in the country, at the same time as the need for clinics is increasing and in particular for students with stress-related problems. SFS considers that student health centres should not charge students any fees. Nor must the activities of student health centres be decreased as a consequence of universities having to make savings. It is also important that a good national standard for the student health centres' activities is set, so that students' well-being is guaranteed, irrespective of choice of place of study or course.

When a student falls ill or suffers from mental or physical ill-health, it is unclear whether the student should contact primary care or a student health centre. It is also unclear for the student health centre what their respective primary care responsibility is. SFS considers that the student health centres' preventive function and supplementary role in relation to primary care must be clarified through the state setting their function. SFS also considers that the lack of collaboration is so serious that the state should to a greater extent actively promote collaboration initiatives between these parties. This collaboration between the higher education institutions' student health centres, student unions and the respective region should be developed to prevent students who feel unwell getting caught between authorities and institutions while awaiting care. Health and medical care can, however, also act preventively. The student health centres', the health service and the higher education institutions' preventive work is a crucial prerequisite in promoting good health in students.

3.7 Social security systems

All students must have the right to be sick with functioning social insurance cover. Parental insurance must be adapted to suit students. It must be self-evident that a student shall be able to return to his/her studies following parental leave. SFS considers that students shall be able to start a family without losing their occupation. Students' period of study should be as secure and as insured as for other groups in society. For this reason, SFS demands that students shall be able to be off sick on a part-time basis. Students' health insurance and compensation while caring for a sick child shall be linked to the occupation as student instead of to the student finance system, in order to include all students. SFS considers that the qualifying period for reporting sick and care for a sick child should be a maximum of 7 days.

When a student returns to his/her studies after a period off sick, the student shall be entitled to rehabilitation. Responsibility for student rehabilitation should rest with the programme arranger. It shall be made clear what measures the student is entitled to, and what the programme arranger is obliged to offer. A student who so wishes shall be able to receive rehabilitation to return to the studies. The responsibility of the higher education institutions includes helping students who have fallen behind due to sickness by formulating a plan for how they are to be able to return to their studies, retake missed elements and in the longer term complete examinations. SFS demands that the universities and other authorities adapt their activities so that it is possible to meet their responsibility for rehabilitation and if this doesn't take place, action should be taken.

The social insurance terms vary for third-cycle students depending on their financing format. SFS considers that all third-cycle students shall have secure employment from day one, in order to be covered by the social security systems. It is never defensible to deny third-cycle students secure employment. There is a political responsibility to ensure universities employ all third-cycle students and to accept that costs may increase slightly as a result. For third-cycle students employed outside academia, the higher education institution shall make sure that the postgraduate student is insured through the other employer and is covered by the social security systems.

3.8 Wider opportunities for having an influence

There are a number of obstacles that can affect students' opportunities to have an influence. Student influence is largely limited to those students who understand the Swedish language. This should be seen in relation to academia's wish for greater internationalisation. In order for student influence to be available to all, language must not set up barriers. For this reason, the Language Act regarding the language of public authorities should make it possible for universities to be bilingual. Bilingualism will make participation more equal for both Swedish speaking and non-Swedish speaking students.

Besides linguistic prerequisites, there are other obstacles which restrict opportunities for student influence. Enabling students to take on representative assignments can involve, for example, remuneration and compensation of missed teaching. SFS considers that if financial compensation is payable to elected representatives who are not students, compensation or remuneration should also be payable to student representatives. Compensation to third-cycle students shall aim to create opportunities to participate in student influencing and collegiate influencing within the framework for the doctoral student position.

3.9 Studying with a disability

All higher education shall be designed to be accessible to all. Examination formats, educational environments and educational tools need to be developed beyond norms for how education has traditionally been carried out. In addition to developed and accessible higher education, there is a need for educational support measures. Educational support

measures have the aim of reducing or removing obstacles to students with documented disabilities, so that everybody can study on the same prerequisites, irrespective of any disability.

A disability should not be an obstacle to applying for higher education. Neither shall a lack of educational support measures or premises that are not accessible shall be reasons why a student has to interrupt studies. For this reason, it is very important that funds for educational support measures are never put at risk in university budgets. SFS also demands that there shall always be safeguarded financing for educational support measures at national level.

There are no national guidelines for what “special educational support measures” refer to. The lack of national guidelines contributes to a lack of balance between Swedish universities in terms of the range and design of educational support measures. Nor is there any minimum level for what a student may expect in terms of support when accepted for a course. For this reason, SFS wants guidelines drawn up for a national approach. With a common definition, SFS wants to see a standardised basic range of educational support measures. The educational support can then be adapted to meet the needs of individual students.

Information about available support functions shall be clear, for both prospective and accepted students. Lack of information about available educational support measures shall not prevent studies abroad either.

4. A gender equal and representative teaching staff

In its Programme of Principles, SFS establishes that academia shall be characterised by a norm-critical attitude and strive to be an example to other activities within the area of equal conditions. The importance is highlighted of a more heterogeneous teaching staff, which to a greater extent reflects society, and which would contribute to more broadly-based knowledge and research production. Gender equality within academia is slowly increasing, but in order to achieve entirely open and gender-equal universities, more measures should be introduced. To achieve broadly-based universities, it is also important to counteract the fact that work tasks and academic areas are considered to be linked to a certain gender, this can be prevented by highlighting gender-bound study choices. A norm-critical attitude is one of the ways of widening academia, within teaching as well as within research.

4.1 From a homogeneous to a heterogeneous teaching staff

SFS considers that the teaching staff at higher education institutions should reflect the composition of society. All higher education institutions should therefore work actively against skewed recruitment of the teaching staff, by being norm-critical in each appointment in order to achieve diversity and to counteract a discriminatory structure.

This should be done in parallel with long-term work focusing on educational merit. Academia has a tradition of not prioritising educational skills to the same extent as scientific skills. SFS considers that educational skill shall be deemed equal in value to scientific competence in the appointment of lecturers. An old-fashioned gender-stereotypical attitude to teaching and administration becomes a trap for women, which leads to reduced career opportunities. In order to counteract certain assignments usually being performed by a certain gender, activities in the academic world must be given the same status.

Academia has traditionally had an over-representation of older, white men. Those who belong to this group have traditionally received larger research grants, for example through receiving disproportionately large parts of so-called “strategic research investments”. SFS considers that research funds shall be allocated so that they promote the entire width of the researcher corps within each scientific field. This increases the opportunity for more members of under-represented groups to seek a career within academic fields and thus drive research forward with a broadened perspective. In this way, the activities can also utilise a diversity of experiences, which in the long term creates better research and education.

If different types of experiences are valued by academia, there are also more incentives for individuals who leave academia for a working life in another field to return and contribute with new perspectives. SFS considers that applications for research funds to a greater extent should be prepared anonymously in order for applications to be evaluated equally.

4.2 Norm-critical educational methods

Norm-critical is an attitude where what is often taken for granted is questioned. For example, there is always an author behind each title in the course literature who brings his/her view of science into the literature. Without norm criticism, the course literature can become homogenous and give the students a view of reality within the knowledge area and scientific field based on the definition the author uses as a starting point. The same applies to the course content and planning. The lecturer has great impact on the students’ learning process and understanding of the knowledge area and scientific field. Likewise, the lecturer’s language creates a perception of what is the correct choice of words.

Historically, higher education and research has been carried out based on a male gender norm. This also applies to the whiteness norm, as well as norms relating to class, age and sexuality. This has contributed to educational methods and research into education being adapted to suit privileged groups in society. Norm-critical educational methods provides students with broad understanding of the knowledge area, makes visible norms within the own discipline and creates room for reflection on norms in learning. By having a critical attitude, the results from research can be made accessible to more people, and contribute to societal change. SFS considers that all teaching methods within higher education should be norm-critical. To facilitate a norm-critical educational basis within

higher education, norm-critical perspectives shall be part of university teacher training for teaching personnel and research students, in order that this perspective can permeate all teaching at first-cycle and advanced level.

4.3 Gender equality integration

Gender equality integration as a working method aims to ensure that all decisions made within public authorities shall be permeated by a gender equality perspective. This means that the authority shall carry out a consequence analysis of how various groups are impacted on in conjunction with decisions. In this way, it is possible to notice or avoid groups being disadvantaged by the decision. Academia in its entirety must be integrated in terms of gender equality in order to become more inclusive. The gender equality work does not just consist of gender equality and equal treatment plans or work teams with a promoting mandate. Gender equality is a perspective that shall permeate all decisions, everything from the choices made by universities to decisions made by individual lecturers about how to arrange the teaching. In order for universities to reflect society, reflection is needed on the consequences of different decisions on different groups. Only by being aware of gender equality can the learning process and research reflect different views that lead to the development of society as a whole. For SFS, gender equality integration is an important part of the puzzle of creating more egalitarian and gender equal universities.